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THE DEPRESSION Thomas: The Depression

by Lorraine S. Thomas

As I sit here surveying all that I own and the comfort in which I live, I think of all the people living in poverty now because of the recession, and my mind wanders back to 1929 the year of the big depression. I was only one year old at the time and so did not feel the impact of those hard times or even realize what was happening. I decided to talk with my Uncle Stanley, who is now around 70 years old, about that sad period in the history of our country. The following is his view of the great depression of 1929.

"My parents lost their home in the depression," said Uncle Stanley in a somber voice. "There were seven of us at home, my mother, father, three brothers, my sister and myself. I was about 18 years old at that time. One day we were comfortable and happy, and the next day the bank took away our house." He was silent for a minute, and I knew he was recalling the horror of it all. He told me later that he feels more frightened now than he did then, for now he is older, has possessions of his own and realizes what it would be like to lose them all.

"People who had no job had to go on relief. This was very traumatic for the immigrants who had come from Poland, as my parents did, for they were proud and wanted to work and proud of their work but instead had to ask for charity," said Uncle Stanley in a voice filled with sorrow. "Once a week the people had to stand in lines waiting for a basket of food." Uncle Stanley couldn't remember who the food was from, but he assumed it was from the state. The baskets contained vegetables, cheese, bread and sometimes Canadian bacon. Later, people would get together and talk, as there was nothing else to do, about what was in their basket, and then they would exchange foods trying to get a certain vegetable or cheese enjoyed more by their family. Because people had no money, their social life centered on visiting each other and sharing whatever it was they had.

"I earned \$.35 an hour when I worked for Goldblatt's in the advertising department," said Uncle Stanley. "I worked two hours each day as there was not very much advertising put into the newspapers at that time. People were not working and had no money to buy anything even if the sale ads were enticing. Jobs were scarce then," continued Uncle Stanley, as he once again continued to talk in a more serious tone of voice. "If a person was lucky enough to have a job, he really had to put up with a lot from his employer. If the employer asked you to work overtime, you did not get paid for that time. The employer would give you \$.75 for dinner and that was all. The employer would give you \$.75 for dinner and knew there were 40 other men waiting to grab his job. And so people worked, sometimes under terrible conditions. Later, as years went by, the unions became stronger, and the people more organized. Those who had no job looked for any type of work. Some washed dishes in a restaurant, some swept sidewalks, and it was not uncommon for several musicians to band together and stand on a corner playing for pennies. People were desperate."

"We had a corner grocery store in our neighborhood, in fact, they were common in those days. The store in our neighborhood was owned by two men, not related, who went into partnership and bought this little grocery store. They worked day and night, and the store became quite successful. After a few years went by, the one partner sold out to the other partner and put his money in the bank. He was looking for some other field of work to get into. Then the depression hit. People lost all their money and so did the man who sold his share of the store. This man was success oriented, and couldn't accept his loss. He killed himself." My heart ached as I watched Uncle Stanley clear his throat and nervously brush his hand across his eyes as he told of this tragedy. How many more happenings such as this one are still living in the hearts of people today, I wonder.

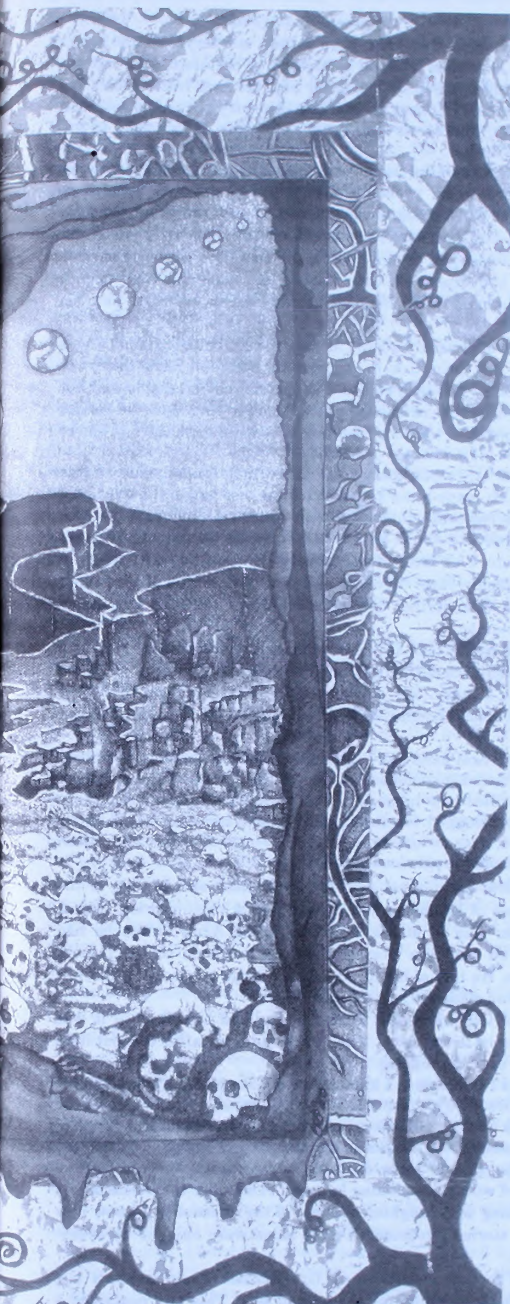


I decided to steer the conversation toward some lighter aspects of the depression, if, indeed, there were any. "How much did a candy bar cost?" I asked.

"Five cents," he replied.

"Five cents! Are you kidding me?"

"No, really, that is what they cost, and huge banana splits covered with real whipped cream, plump, red cherries and chopped nuts cost twenty-five cents."



— Kathy Bruning

"Wow," I exclaimed, "I'll bet you ate a lot of those."

"No way," Uncle Stanley replied, "twenty-five cents was a lot of money then. When I took a girl on a date and bought her a banana split, I had to save for a long time for that treat, and the girl had to be something special before I spent that kind of money on her." I laughed, thinking of the \$20.00 I had advanced my son when he went on a date last Saturday.

"Sweet rolls were two cents and eclairs, big and chocolate, were five cents each," related Uncle Stanley, as he smacked his lips and rolled his sparkling green eyes in delight, "and it took two guys to eat one, they were so big." I laughed and secretly wished I could bit into one of them for eclairs are my favorite.

"Sometimes, not very often," Uncle Stanley recalled, "we went to a movie. The movie cost ten cents at that time, and we got to see a double feature. Tim McCoy and Buck Jones were the big stars of the silent movie era. There were others, but Tim and Buck were my favorites," he whispered.

"I remember," said Uncle Stanley, a dancing smile on his lips, "when the funeral director drove his Cadillac, all the people in the neighborhood would run out to look at it. That was really a sight to see."

"Why was it such a wonder?" I asked. "What is so special about a Cadillac?"

"Well," Uncle Stanley replied, "a new Ford cost about \$800.00 and the average person couldn't even afford that but a Cadillac cost around \$2,000 to \$3,000 and the only one in the neighborhood who could afford one was the funeral director. So when he drove around in it, the people would stand and gape with their mouths open at the shiny, sleek black car that sparkled as it smoothly whisked by." Uncle Stanley became more serious as he continued his story. "Families stuck together," he said, as he sat down in his favorite brown, stuffed chair. "There weren't the divorces we have now. A wife knew that her husband was doing the best he could and rarely complained. Everybody pitched in. In our household, whoever was lucky enough to have a job, contributed most of their check to keep food on the table. There was no quibbling about his or mine or yours, it was all ours. Children realized what was happening and how difficult it was for the parents, and together families fought to survive during this bad time."

Uncle Stanley looked exhausted as our conversation brought back memories of the hard times past, and feelings long since hidden were now awakened. I could see he was affected by the depression more than he cared to admit. The frown on his furrowed brow made me realize that fear of a recurrence still lingered somewhere within that aging, thin body. I wanted to hold him and reassure him that everything is all right, but instead, I sat in my chair in silence and watched him gaze out of the window. A few moments passed and Uncle Stanley reaffirmed, "But we made it, we stuck together and made it." I agreed. He did make it. He was a survivor.

*Divorce is likened unto death — only far worse
Because the corpse refuses to die.*

— Mary Ryder-Swanson '83

SEVERANCE

*One fibrous strand after another
clips
a scrappedbook of memory
into unfocused images.*

*Those moments I'd like to fix
like some kodaprint in my heart
slide further from lips and eyes,
more unfair each fair day.*

*Most unfairless,
no fair lads and lassies
ever see the exposed tendril of smoke
or smell the underdeveloped ashes of time.*

— Lee Kesselman